

# 37

## THE DELIBERATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPACE IN THE FOCUS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF RUSSIAN YOUTH

### EL POTENCIAL DELIBERATIVO DEL ESPACIO PÚBLICO DIGITAL EN EL FOCO DE LAS TRANSFORMACIONES ANTROPOLÓGICAS DE LA JUVENTUD RUSA

Evgeniya Nikolaeva<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [kaisa1011@rambler.ru](mailto:kaisa1011@rambler.ru)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0150-1611>

Polina Kotliar<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [polikotsob@mail.ru](mailto:polikotsob@mail.ru)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4795-8841>

Mikhail Nikolaev<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [mihrutkanik@gmail.com](mailto:mihrutkanik@gmail.com)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7200-7488>

Aisylu Kamaleeva<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [alslkazan@mail.ru](mailto:alslkazan@mail.ru)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3284-3358>

<sup>1</sup> Kazan Federal University. Russia.

#### Suggested citation (APA, seventh ed.)

Nikolaeva, E., Kotliar, P., Nikolaev, M., & Kamaleeva, A. (2024). The deliberative potential of the digital public space in the focus of anthropological transformations of russian youth. *Revista Conrado*, 20(96), 377-381.

#### ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the deliberative potential of the new (digital) media space, focusing on anthropological transformations. The theoretical provisions of the study are substantiated by empirical data that were obtained as a result of a massive online survey of Russian youth. The given paper presents the distribution of opinions of young respondents about the possibilities of digital media in the formation of a deliberative public digital space. Based on the survey results, the authors carried out an exposition of anthropological dynamics, determined by the specifics of modern (digital) media, which reveals signs of a humanitarian crisis. Digital media make the world horizontal, creating the illusion of universal equality. As a result, the sphere of public discourse transforms: the ways of discussing, informing, educating, and presenting facts are fundamentally changing.

#### Keywords:

Digital space, social media, public sphere, citizen deliberation, identity.

#### RESUMEN

El artículo investiga el potencial deliberativo del nuevo espacio mediático (digital), centrándose en las transformaciones antropológicas. Las disposiciones teóricas del estudio se fundamentan en datos empíricos obtenidos como resultado de una encuesta masiva en línea entre la juventud rusa. El artículo presentado presenta la distribución de opiniones de los jóvenes encuestados sobre las posibilidades de los medios digitales en la formación de un espacio digital público deliberativo. A partir de los resultados de la encuesta, los autores llevaron a cabo una exposición de la dinámica antropológica, determinada por las particularidades de los medios de comunicación (digitales) modernos, que revela signos de una crisis humanitaria. Los medios digitales horizontalizan el mundo, creando la ilusión de igualdad universal. Como resultado, la esfera del discurso público se transforma: las formas de discutir, informar, educar y presentar los hechos están cambiando fundamentalmente.

#### Palabras clave:

Espacio digital, redes sociales, esfera pública, deliberación ciudadana, identidad.

## INTRODUCTION

The media revolution that humanity has been going through since the end of the 20th century has led to the genesis of digital reality. By interacting in this reality, humans acquire new attributes and lose previous ones that traditionally defined them for a long time. These transformations are so fundamental that they can be labeled as anthropological shifts. They affect a person's identity and status as a responsible and mature citizen who acts in a deliberative public environment. They limit and even block mental activity, the ability to work with ideas, reflect and identify inconsistencies in one's own and other's minds. They also question the quality of individual communication and social connections.

The reduction of the egalitarian potential of the digital public environment destroys the culture of civic participation and makes it impossible deliberative space of discursiveness to form. The transition of identity to the digital space, where it takes the form of an online profile, changes the direction of personal activity from oneself to a digital representation. In interactive digital media streams conditions, humans overcome the congestion and subjection of freedom through identification therapy that results in losing the mental prism directed toward rational reflection. There are many symptoms of human inflation: destroyed foundations of motivation and goal-setting, and the leveling of the understanding of life as a meaningful movement typically characterized by connectivity, consistency, and continuity.

The designated theses explain the authors' interest in studying the opinions of modern youth with respect to the specifics of the digital media space. In April 2023, a survey "Digital Public Space: Opportunities and Challenges", which purpose was to study the attitude of young people to the possibilities of realizing their civic participation through digital media, was conducted. Particular attention in the study was given to the problem of anthropological transformations, which appears to be the prism through which the authors explore the phenomenon of digital public space.

The survey covered representatives of Russian youth aged 16 to 27 years. The questionnaire included both open and closed questions. The sampling frame totaled 563 respondents with various ethnic, territorial and gender-age characteristics: male – 38.2%, female - 61.8%; respondents were representatives of 27 nationalities living on the territory of the Russian Federation. Out of these, 43% indicated the capital of the Russian Federation as the place of territorial localization, and 57% named other cities of Russia.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theoretical and methodological basis of the paper is the emphasis on the concept of discursive ethics by

Jürgen Habermas, as well as his ideas on the state of modern media and the public sphere.

We focus on Habermas' logic of analysis in its application as the theoretical and methodological basis for the research of anthropological transformations mediated by the new (digital) media. This allows us to explicate the anthropological shifts caused by rapidly developing digital media.

The chosen method of empirical research is an online questionnaire format. The authors believe it proves to be a promising method, allowing them to receive adequate feedback from young people. Such form of communication in the digital environment is familiar to young people, it involves the use of existing gadgets and guarantees anonymity. As a result, researchers receive a considerable amount of information necessary for explication and understanding of those states of youth that mark anthropological shifts, based on the specifics of modern media.

In his recently published book, the famous German philosopher Jürgen Habermas makes a disappointing diagnosis for our time – digital media is destroying the public environment. In his work made him famous in 1962, Habermas developed the concept of discursive ethics (Habermas, 1989), which states that citizens engaged in discussion must make several basic pragmatic assumptions. The most important prerequisite is the perfect speech situation in which no force except that of the better argument is exercised: "the unforced force of the better argument" (Bhattacharjee, 2021). In communication aimed at achieving mutual understanding, we are compelled to make decisions based on the better argument alone. Empirical impact, fear, lie, and psychological violence are not considered valid arguments. This foundation supports the idea of deliberative democracy, which suggests the existence of a public discussion space for the discussion of socially significant questions.

At first glance, it may seem that Habermas should welcome the emergence of new media, as it brings his ideal closer to its maximum. Digital social media contains a vast potential for egalitarian participation, democratizes communication, and creates a discussion space. However, at the same time, it also forms authoritarian tendencies, which question Habermas' ideal.

In this regard, the respondents were asked to answer the question "Which trend is more inherent to the modern digital social media"? According to the data obtained, 50% of respondents believe that they 'democratize communication and create a space for discussing socially significant issues', 44.4% note that they "form authoritarian tendencies", whereas the remaining 5.6% of respondents record "opposite trends: both democratic and authoritarian ones".

The following answers were received to the question "What, in your opinion, is the basis for the discussion of

socially significant issues/problems in the public digital space?": 47.6% of respondents called the qualitative argumentation of the expressed opinion such a basis, 34.7% mentioned manipulative influence on the interlocutor, 17.7% spoke of deception and psychological pressure. The listed trends led to the inclusion of a block of questions in the survey questionnaire, the purpose of which was to track the mechanisms of forming the attitude of young people to socially significant problems.

2. In contrast to the traditional publicity sphere, the new (digital) publicity is unstructured and devoid of content filters. In the traditional publicity sphere, well-educated journalists, editors, and proofreaders were active, and there was the checking of facts and quality of arguments that provided the quality of communicative moves and, respectively, the quality of deliberation. In the digital public space, there are many opinions that, according to Habermas, have authoritarian and egalitarian potential. For digital concerns, the quality of arguments is insignificant. The most important thing is interest in the platform, the number of followers, and their likes. Instead of the position of a mature and free citizen, there is a commodity (economization of opinions). Opinion turns into opinion likeness, and publicity becomes pseudo-publicity. The opinion leaders and bloggers repress and subordinate journalism.

The respondents' answers to the question "Do you experience difficulties forming your own position on socially significant issues while staying in information streams that often broadcast contradictory content?" have distributed as follows: 29.4% of respondents report having never experienced them, 51.1% of respondents claim sometimes experiencing these difficulties, and 19.5% of respondents admit experiencing them often. Answering the question "Who is the most authoritative source of information (opinion leader) for you," 41.6% of respondents consider professionals in their field to be such, 27.8% of respondents call scientists; bloggers appear to be an authoritative source for 17% of respondents, whilst 13.6% of respondents claim that "they don't trust anyone and have to think for themselves therefore."

Respondents were asked to name the criteria they normally follow in order to determine their own attitude to the position of the author of the publication. 52% of respondents named the search for alternative positions in other publications as a criterion, 26.3% – independent analysis of the publication, 21.7% – the number of likes and dislikes posted under the publication.

3. Jürgen Habermas turns his attention to a severe problem of digital publicity. With the emergence of social media, everyone becomes an author, which can be problematic. Most people are not prepared for this role, as it requires being taught (to develop critical and reflexive thinking, argue the position, form a reasoned opinion and etc.). Additionally, the social media space must structure by intellectuals who can act as mentors, teachers, and

editors. This is the prerequisite for creating a public space for everyone, with inclusiveness as a core property. However, nowadays, the modern public space turns into an exclusive space, with a commercial nature that serves economic purposes. In this faceless media space, public opinion forms artificially (allegedly public opinion) and becomes a tool of the subculture of power. At the same time, the egalitarian potential of new media space suppresses by authoritarian tendencies, which doesn't help develop the culture of civic participation. These tendencies become the markers of one of the anthropological shifts provided by the specifics of modern media: the mature citizen, as an active participant in the perfect speech situation, acquires more features of a mental construct that, in reality, nobody fits.

The meaningful interpretation of the respondents' answers to the question "Does one need to learn to be an author?" was aimed at explicating the attitude of young people to the need of developing reflexive and critical thinking and the ability of conducting a reasoned narrative for high-quality and responsible authorship in social media. Respondents' opinions have distributed as follows: 54% of respondents believe that any user, having an appropriate aspiration, can become an author, 46% of respondents are convinced that this skill needs to be mastered. The results obtained largely confirm the position of Yu. Habermas and discover the existence of a serious problem of sources of public opinion formation. The problem is aggravated if we take into account the fact that 51.1% of respondents recognize the need of structuring the social media space, and 48.9% of respondents believe that it should be completely free.

4. Another significant anthropological shift is the transformation of the concepts of identity and self, which are no longer connected to traditional ideas in the digital society. The line created in the era of Antiquity and going through medieval and modern times contained elements of discreteness. In the same context, Moeller & D'Ambrosio (2021), writes that in the digital age, an individual who promotes his profile in a social network comes to the forefront. Therefore, it is appropriate to refer to profile identity and profile self.

Users try to position themselves through their representation in profiles, which gives their identity specific characteristics. This makes mode of existence more difficult, as one needs to be online as much as possible, maintain their profile, create and manage its content. All of this requires a significant amount of time. As a result, working on oneself is replaced by caring for and grooming the profile. The identity becomes heterogeneous, and only a tiny part of the human self is present in the traditional socio-cultural environment, often in a state of "abandonment". Some Russian researchers have turned their attention to the emergence of new forms of identification, which they name digital (Emelin, 2017; Koneva, 2018; Kondakov & Kostyleva, 2019). Users connect to a

system that generates data flow every second, producing an instant change of scenery. The decontextualization of events, facts, and thoughts of them becomes normal in digital media streams, leaving no room for practices of meaningfulness, plot, narrativity, and discursivity. An individual “overwhelmed” with freedom may seek to join the “right” group of opinions (hate) and the “moral” point of view instead of rational reflection, which is not possible, and the individual is not capable of it. In this case, we can observe the effect of the identification therapy expressed in the desire to join and support the wave of hatred and avoid the need to choose and think.

With the aim of extrapolating Moeller & D'Ambrosio (2021), ideas to the Russian socio-cultural environment and discover the phenomenon of profile identity, respondents were asked questions related to their representation in various social networks. The following answers were received to the question “What social networks do you have profiles on?”: “Telegram” for 100% of respondents, “Instagram” for 97%, “VKontakte” for 91%, “YouTube” for 89%, “TikTok” for 48%, Facebook for 23%, Twitter for 19%, Reddit for 8.7%, and Odnoklassniki for 7.1% respectively. At the same time, the average time that respondents spend on social networks amounts to 8.5 hours a day (according to the information panel on the time of using the screen of mobile phones).

The institutional embodiment of the principles of deliberative democracy is poorly studied, resulting in a divergence between the deliberative theory and actual political practice. Therefore, the question of how to form a mature and responsible citizen who embodies the principles of deliberation in the digital public space through their activity remains open. Nonetheless, some researchers argue that the emergence of digital technologies and their use in social practice significantly expands the horizon of opportunities for deliberation. In his paper, Thiel (2022), from the University of Erfurt reflects on the changes digitalization brings to society. In the digital space, the functioning of polylogue becomes possible, where many people can interact with many others. This leads to the never-ending expansion and complication of communication while reducing economic costs through technical mediation. As a result, there is an emergence of a “communicative abundance” situation where users can communicate at any time. The author claims that we can observe the transition from “collective action” to “connective action”, a concept by A. Segerberg and L. Bennett. Digital activism, such as #blacklivesmatter and #metoo, can be attributed to connective action, where each participant mobilizes themselves without the help of a centralized organization.

Within the European research paradigm a new term «cyberdemocracy» arose (Lévy, 2002) implies the convergence of classical democratic institutions and modern media technologies that should contribute to the formation of civic society on completely new quality level and help to overcome the crisis of modern democratic institutions.

The idea of creating a new space for communication, for an all-inclusive, transparent, and democratic dialogue on current political problems, contributes to the fact that the model of “cyberdemocracy” becomes similar to the concept of deliberative democracy. However, the question of providing the necessary conditions for qualitative deliberation as a process of discussing serious political and social issues remains open. In addition to procedural aspects of a technical nature, no less important is the compliance with some imperatives like a generality, competence, ethics, and certain flexibility of beliefs (Held, 2006; Habermas, 2018).

It should be noted that digital technologies can become a significant obstacle to the development of deliberative democracy. The widespread use of centralized internet platforms carries the risk of monopolization of these platforms, leading to the establishment of frameworks in the processes of discussion in social networks (Freuler, 2021). In this case, public discussion of socially important issues becomes controlled and managed, which goes against the basic principles of deliberative democracy. There is a danger of imitating public discussion instead of engaging in actual democratic procedures.

At the beginning of the 21st century centralized Internet and social networks were perceived as “liberation technology”, facilitating the spread of liberal democracy (Diamond, 2010). Now researchers pay attention to the controversial nature of digital technologies. Hacker & Van Dijk (2000), define “digital democracy” as “a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional analogue political practices”. (p. 201)

French researcher Laffaille (2017), claims that in the public consciousness, the idea of participatory democracy cultivated nowadays and identical to deliberative democracy is unlikely to compensate for the “birth defect” of modern democracy. In his opinion, there is no crisis of representative democracy, it is just a myth. The crisis is a natural state of it since the representative system has an ontological flaw. There is an inevitable gap between rulers and ruled due to the deadly and irresistible fiction: the chosen ones rule on behalf of the sovereign people and rely on the people's will as well. Representative democracy was caught in its own trap and cannot get out.

This paper has been supported by the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program (Priority-2030).

## CONCLUSIONS

The anthropological shifts brought about by humans' presence in the digital space often exhibit symptoms of human inflation, such as the undermining of motivation and goal-setting foundations, and the flattening of the



perception of life as a meaningful journey marked by connectivity, coherence, and continuity.

The picture of reality, our epistemic attitude to the world, and the moral basis of our behavior are often formed in us spontaneously throughout our life as a result of external influences. In digital reality, the number of such influences is growing exponentially. As the conducted empirical research has shown, modern young people are often dependent, and are unaware of what belongs to them and what has come from the outside, preferring to act according to the type of spontaneous identifications. To gain psychological stability, young people use ready-made interpretation schemes, with which they try to identify themselves as much as possible. Nowadays, a young person is supposed to subject these influences to reflection, to give a good serious thought to their quality: whether it is destructive or creative.

However, the fragmentarily and randomness of the human Self that young people receive together with the flows of influence emanating from digital infrastructures, as well as its immaturity, make this task difficult to solve. To overcome the ephemerality of ourselves and lead ourselves out of the digital Cave (Plato's image) is the modern anthropological agenda. We are talking about constructive work, converting the chaos of external influences into internal orderliness. It implies the ability to lead the diversity of experience (read, seen, heard, etc.) to integrity, consistency, and coherence and thereby build from the particular information a knowledge worldview system of coordinates that forms the basis of deliberative processes.

The care for worldview is the care for the individual (for the soul) and an attempt to understand ourselves by the principle of integrity. In this context, the worldview acts as a guarantor of our security, harmony with ourselves, other people, and with the world. Unless one engages in it consciously and purposefully, then they doom themselves to exist in a very tense field, where multiple external influences are trying to destroy those mental bonds, allowing them to remain a person and a citizen.

This paper has been supported by the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program (Priority-2030).

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Bhattacharjee, G. (2021). Habermasian Discourse Theory of Morality: A Critique. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 9(10), 850-856.
- Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation technology. *Journal of democracy*, 21(3), 69-83.
- Emelin, V. A. (2017). *Identity in the information society*. Kanon+ ROOI «Reabilitatsiya».
- Freuler, O. J. (2021). *The Neutrality Pyramid: A policy framework to distribute power over the net*. *Web Centralization Monitor*, (11), 39-74.

- Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (2018). *Inclusion of the other: Studies in political theory*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hacker, K. L., & Van Dijk, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Digital democracy: Issues of theory and practice*. Sage.
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy* (3rd ed.). Polity Press.
- Kondakov, A. M., & Kostyleva, A. A. (2019). Digital Identity, Digital Self-Identification, Digital Profile: Statement of the Problem. *Bulletin of Peoples' Friendship University of Russia. Informatization of education*, 16(3), 207-218.
- Koneva, A. V. (2018). Tsifrovaya identichnost': protsessy identifikatsii i reprezentatsii v setevoy kommunikatsii. *Bulletin of the Leningrad State University named after A.S. Pushkin*, 1, 50-59.
- Laffaille, F. (2017). La démocratie participative, niaiserie contemporaine. *Recueil Dalloz*, (02).
- Lévy, P. (2002). *Ciberdemocracia. Ensayo sobre filosofía-política*. Editorial UOC.
- Moeller, H. G., & D'Ambrosio, P. J. (2021). *You and your profile: Identity after authenticity*. Columbia University Press.
- Thiel, T. (2022). Der digitale Strukturwandel von Öffentlichkeit: Demokratietheoretische Anmerkungen. *Demokratie und Öffentlichkeit im 21. Jahrhundert-zur Macht des Digitalen*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.